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AUTHOR Accetta, Randy
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ABSTRACT

This paper maintains that although telecourses can be an excellent tool for providing information, they can also be abused and misused. The paper argues that if certain theoretical and practical issues are not addressed regarding the ways emerging technologies such as telecourses are used in higher education, the consequences may be staggering. Recounting the experiences of an instructor at Pima Community College (PCC) in Tucson, Arizona, who has developed writing telecourses, the paper first provides background information on the particular case of PCC and then provides information on telecourses in general. The paper raises the following concerns about using telecourses to teach English studies: (1) because telecourses are "canned" and distributed for years on end, even though they may use cutting-edge pedagogy at the time of production these courses become immediately out-dated; (2) a study of the influence of telecourses on the faculty who teach them suggests that "the longer instructors teach via distance educational technology, the more their teaching approaches in both traditional and distance settings tend to resemble each other"; (3) while telecourses enable students who are single working mothers to enter academic and professional communities previously denied them, these courses also continue to isolate and marginalize them; (4) by its nature, one-way, non-interactive telecourses will never be places for the consistent group learning that sparks critical thinking; and (5) in a similar vein, the "telecourse voice" must be questioned. Questions are asked about who will create future telecourses and who benefits from the increased advertising and the decreased retention rates, given that retention rates are universally low. (Contains 4 notes and 15 references.) (NKA)

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TV Teachers and Regurgitation: The Implications of Using Telecourses to Teach English Studies

Randy Accetta
University of Arizona

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Randy Accetta
University of Arizona
16 March 1998, Chicago, IL
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TV Teachers and Regurgitation: The Implications of Using Telecourses to Teach English Studies

I wasn't reading and I wasn't writing. Instead I was watching television in the living room with friends, channel surfing and talking. One friend held the remote control. Click: ESPN SportsCenter--"He shoots! He scores! The Rangers win." Click: MTV and a rock and roll video. After a few moments of watching the bumping and grinding, someone said, "Hey, let's watch the Randy Channel." And click, there I was: sitting behind a lectern, with a computer screen off to the side. I sat on the sofa and watched myself stare intently at the invisible camera, eyes wide and hands waving as I made my point. I heard myself say, "OK, now remember what we said last class: language is powerful. Let's look at ways metaphors can be used to convey complicated meanings." The television screen switched from my face to a PowerPoint computer screen on which I had written a lesson on metaphors. As my friends howled in laughter at my hand-waving, on-screen image, I grabbed the remote control and changed the channel.

The "Randy Channel" is actually one of the two cable channels on which Pima Community College (PCC) in Tucson, Arizona transmits telecourses. Although PCC has been involved in telecommunication education since the 1970's, until the spring of 1994 Pima had never televised Writing 100 and Writing 101, its two main transfer-level composition courses. When I started developing the telecourses in 1993 I was not convinced that an English class could be taught via television; after teaching the telecourses, however, I am now convinced that students can indeed significantly increase their reading and writing abilities. I am also convinced, though, that because the telecourse that teaches literature and composition manipulates the combined apparatuses of higher education, emerging technologies, the communications industry, and the standard English of the dominant culture, it is an especially important site to investigate.

I maintain that although telecourses can be an excellent tool for providing information, they can also be abused and misused. For instance, the telecourse creates a problematic educational paradigm in which an honored television voice disseminates unchallenged information, and a grader is left judging the performance of students who are constrained to the domestic sphere, removed from personal access to the teacher and other students. Given that telecourses are used in over 50% of two-year colleges and a significant number of four-year schools, and given the rise of virtual universities and other entrepreneurial ventures devoted to higher education, I argue that if we are not careful, we may very well create a future where tomorrow's generation of faculty will be simple fact-checkers, hired as temporary workers to help students regurgitate out-dated knowledge. In this scenario, everyone loses: students, faculty, and institutions. If we do not address certain theoretical and practical issues regarding the ways emerging technologies such as telecourses are used in higher education, the national consequences may be staggering.

I

To make ends meet while pursuing my doctorate in American Literature at the University of Arizona, in 1993 I took a part-time job as an adjunct at Pima, the sixth-largest multi-campus college in the nation. I taught at Pima's Community Campus, whose mission is to provide "an alternative delivery system for offering college classes where students live and work" (*Pima Community College 1993-94 Factbook* 75). As one method to achieve this mission, the Community Campus develops and produces its own telecourses, interactive teleclasses, and Internet-based courses. These distance education courses are increasingly popular: in Fall '93 a half-dozen or so telecourses were offered; by Spring '98, over sixty courses were offered via eight- and sixteen-week and independent study telecourses, interactive teleclasses, and the Internet in such subjects as Anthropology, Business, Computer Science, Economics, Food Science and Nutrition, Home Economics, Humanities, Political Science, Sociology, Spanish, Math, Writing, Psychology, History, and Literature.

The Community Campus relies heavily on part-time employees. In 1993, the year I was first hired by the Campus, 343 of the 345 total faculty employed were part-time (*Factbook* 93). This

reliance on part-timers accords with the growing national trend for colleges and universities to hire part-time teachers at low wages, with few benefits, and little institutional support or affiliation. The December, 1997 *Final Report* by the MLA Committee on Professional Employment recognizes the trouble: "The disturbingly heavy reliance on part-time faculty that characterizes American higher education today contributes both directly and indirectly to the failures of our academic system" (Gilbert 5). As I will argue, we must be careful lest courses taught by television contribute to these systemic failures.

In September of 1993 I attended a PCC distance education workshop on telecourses. Within a week of the workshop I had approached the associate dean about developing and teaching a Writing telecourse, a course that had not yet been produced in-house at PCC. By December, I was in a television studio taping the first televised session of Writing 100, Writing Fundamentals, a course on paragraph and short essay development. By the end of the Spring semester, we had completed the thirty hours of taping required for Writing 100; by the Fall of '94, I had developed and produced another semester-long course, Writing 101. I was paid the equivalent of one course to develop each course, and I receive no remuneration or royalties when the courses are aired and I am not the teacher of record. Ownership of the telecourses is a vexed issue. I can claim copyright for both courses (which I have not yet done), while PCC can present the televised sessions at their discretion via cable television and video cassette, as long as the material is used for the College's non-profit, educational mission. As I write this, both of the Writing telecourses which I developed and produced are offered throughout the year by the Community Campus in eight-week, sixteen-week, and independent study classes. They are cablecast to every cable-ready home in the Tucson area, reaching roughly 200,000 households and airing about 20 hours per week.

A telecourse is a packaged, semester-long course that combines televised lessons with text books, study guides, and other complementary written material.[1] Instead of visiting a classroom with a teacher and fellow students, the students view the weekly, televised lectures from their own home, taking notes, completing assignments, and taking tests. Because information is transmitted one way via cable networks or video cassettes, the student cannot interrupt in real-time to interact with the teacher, but is relegated to the more passive role of consumer, observing and responding to the transmitted information. The televised sessions in my classes look almost like a newscast: I am the televised, on-screen authority, making use of computer graphics and props to disseminate information and keep the student's attention. Although viewing the televised material is required, many students report watching the televised material much the same way they watch television in general: while doing other household tasks, such as taking care of children. In addition to viewing the cable sessions, students can attend classroom review sessions and reach the instructor via voice mail, electronic mail, and regular mail. In my experience, students rarely develop relationships with other students. Athough emerging computer technologies will allow more collaboration and interaction between faculty and students, economic constraints limit these opportunities: not all students and not all institutions have ready access to cutting-edge technology.

Perhaps the major benefit of telecourses is that they reach an important audience of adults who have in general been marginalized professionally, economically, and academically. As an example, the significant majority of telecourse students are women (over 77% of my students are female), often single, often working, and often a parent. When queried why they signed up for the course, my students have written the following responses:

> *--A telecourse is more convenient for my schedule. I have a full load (wife, mother, work, full-time student) and felt a course like this would be easier to take this way. . . My health is questionable and I can assure myself I won't fail by absences.*
> *--I did have knee surgery, and it was real difficult to move around, and I also have a job 30 hours a week.*
> *--I work during the day, and there are not enough classes available during the evening.*
> *--I have neither the ways nor the means to get to a regular class. My schedule is both full, and constantly changing* [sic]. *My husband is disabled, and we still have three children at home.*

These responses represent the situations of many similarly burdened students for whom the telecourse provides access to schooling and therefore one of the few opportunities available to break the pattern of financial and professional insecurity.

While I have uncovered no dissertations or published books that address specifically the role of television in the teaching of English composition and literature, work has been done on the use of telecourses in general. Based on a review of available information, including ERIC documents, dissertation abstracts, and the occasional published article and book addressing telecourses, three points of prevailing conventional wisdom can be distilled: 1) telecourse students can gather and reproduce information at least as successfully as in traditional classroom courses; 2) because of the difficulties involved in distance education, telecourses have a lower retention rate than classroom classes; 3) to succeed in a telecourse, a student needs to be highly motivated, committed, and disciplined.[2]

II

In the United States, there are two primary types of telecourses. One is produced by individual institutions; like mine, these are small-scale, home-made productions designed for a specific and local audience. The second type of telecourse is broadcast-quality, documentary-style programs produced by a consortia of schools, businesses, and non-profit organizations, who then market the programs nationwide. The nationally-produced and distributed telecourses of literature and composition use a variety of formats, including dramatizations and an instructional documentary approach of vignettes, case studies, applications to illustrate the point, and interviews with authors, writing experts, and students. The best of such English courses succeed in including a variety of authors, experts, and texts to reflect the pluralistic nature of America; one course, for instance, includes televised material with James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Allen Ginsberg, Harold Bloom, Amiri Baraka, and a host of others.[3]

According to Ron Brey's seminal study, four major telecourse producers and one funding agency "have been responsible for the production or funding of sixty-nine different telecourses. . . . Their courses account for ninety percent of the total enrollment and eighty-two percent of the total reported uses of telecourses. . . . These telecourses tend to have relatively large enrollments because they are core courses at most institutions" (Brey 25). Since Brey's report, the landscape has shifted slightly as organizations jostle for market share, but the main point still holds true. Although many of these telecourses provide original and stimulating information on the world of arts and letters, to my mind, Brey's findings indicate a troubling pattern: a small group of institutions are creating knowledge for a vast majority of students, particularly in the core course, general education requirements most undergraduates are required to take.

It is not just in the field of telecourses that this commodified centralization of knowledge is occurring. As a 1997 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, "A New Role for Professors in a High-Tech Age?", makes clear, more and more courses are "designed by teams of technology experts and professors, then marketed by publishers or brand-name universities" (Young A27). According to this model, a narrow cluster of scholars and businesses will choose what is considered appropriate educational material for a college education. That material will then be disseminated by a select group of business organizations whose primary goal is, not to allow more access to intellectual growth or create a better citizenry, but to make a profit. In other words, decisions on educational content will be based on what makes money, not on what may be intellectually or culturally important. As a result, the canon of study will become more and more narrow as the market drives it. The *Chronicle* article suggests that if education is created by "teams of professors and technicians working side by side in a publishing company's offices or on the campus of an Ivy League or Big Ten university," curriculum development may be "like producing a Hollywood film or a video game" (Young 27). As this trend continues, access to knowledge will increasingly become owned by profit-centered businesses, and higher education will become even more than now a commodity to be bought and sold.

In fact, the telecourse is a representative site from which to examine the increasing movement from English studies as a *profession* to English studies as a *service*. Grounded in my critical experience, I raise the following concerns with the hope that they will provide a starting place for a conversation about the theoretical and practical implications of using telecourses to teach English studies.

1) The televised sessions of telecourses are a means of transmitting an established body of knowledge. However, because telecourses are "canned" and distributed for years on end, even though they may use what is cutting-edge pedagogy at the time of production, by their very nature these courses become immediately out-dated. Canned courses cannot incorporate new methods, new knowledge, and new theories. The result is that telecourses institutionalize a canon based on material and pedagogy that will quickly become out-dated.

2) A study of the influence of telecourses on the faculty who teach them suggests that "the longer instructors teach via distance educational technology, the more their teaching approaches in both traditional and distance settings tend to resemble each other" (Scott). In my case, I'm unhappy to report, for all my affection for collaborative learning and other student-centered approaches to teaching, after spending so much time in front of the camera I now find myself lecturing in the classroom more than I would like. This leads me to wonder about the implications of the overlap between teaching styles: given that teaching in a classroom is in many ways a performative act, do faculty take some of the communication/performance tricks from television and apply them to beneficial effect in the classroom? Or does the classroom become more akin to the passive, transmission-based television program?

3) A significant majority of telecourse students are women, often mothers, often working, and often single. Telecourses simultaneously enable these women to enter academic and professional communities previously denied them, while at the same time continuing to isolate and marginalize them. It remains to be seen if the gain in student enrollment is equaled by a gain in individual growth, for these students are still left in the domestic sphere to which women have traditionally been consigned, disengaged from the politics and socializing that occur at a campus.

4) By its very nature, one-way, non-interactive telecourses will never be places for the consistent group learning that sparks critical thinking. For instance, in traditional classroom classes, I seek to teach a sort of critical literacy, a way of looking for deeper meanings and root causes that lie beneath the apparent surface meaning of texts. In my role as television teacher of standard written English, I represent the dominant culture: my image on television represents what Allan Bloom has called the "special claim to know and supervise the language" (31). Because the telecourse makes use of ideological apparatuses like the television industry and higher education, the material that I disseminate automatically becomes part of that dominant discourse. In other words, the telecourse functions primarily as the transmitter of dominant myths and official pronouncements, and not as a questioner of that knowledge--and certainly not as a creator of alternative forms of knowledge. What happens if I as the teacher use this form of ideological apparatus to spread a programmed political agenda? What happens if I use the telecourse as a bully-pulpit, exhorting students to think as I want them to, to write as I want, to act as I want? What happens if I seek to infiltrate the minds of my students, using the combined powers of television, education, and language to advance my opinions, beliefs, and desires? These are important concerns, because this is exactly what I do.

5) In a similar vein, we must question the telecourse voice. Given that television is fundamentally a medium for advertising, what products are telecourses selling? What ideologies? As producer and teacher of an English telecourse, I am what Michel de Certeau would call a "professional intellectual," a member of the "church of the media" (169): I am paid by the State of Arizona to define and transmit lessons in standard written English; I am paid to construct and model a cultural text which the uninitiated must consume in order to receive entry into academic, professional, and social communities otherwise denied them. Elizabeth Ellsworth declares that the normative subject, the "ideal rational person," is "European, White, male, middle-class, Christian, able-bodied, thin, and heterosexual" (96), a description that in many ways describes me. Ellsworth's postructuralist feminism repudiates this normative subject, and thus calls into question my authority as a television instructor, forcing me to ask a variety of questions: while many telecourses do incorporate many of the voices and perspectives from the wide spectrum of American culture, what about those, like mine, that don't? If critical teaching is a counter-hegemonic act, and if telecourses like mine do not fully participate in

critical teaching, what hegemonies do telecourses perpetuate?[4] Finally, what hegemonies should they perpetuate?

6) In the future, who will create these telecourses? So far, the majority of telecourses I've studied are well-intentioned and responsibly produced, incorporating leading academic experts and a multiplicity of perspectives in an admirable effort to provide worthwhile and appropriate information to students. But what will happen as the drive for profits grows? *The Chronicle of Higher Education* indicates that in virtual universities, "Individual professors' lectures could be replaced by multi-media Web sites that could include video clips of famous scholars in the field" (Young 9), while assessment will be controlled by outside organizations. The implications of such a system are only beginning to come into focus. Phyllis Franklin addresses one implication in the Spring '98 "MLA Newsletter": "At issue are future career opportunities for academics. Will we have a small mandarin class of privileged, tenured faculty members who teach advanced courses only and large numbers of easily eliminated part-time and adjunct faculty members who teach introductory courses and are not expected to be scholars?" (5). This is the perfect question to ask, for if higher education dependent on technology continues to be driven by a profit motive, the job of teachers will change. Teachers will no longer need any depth or breadth of knowledge, for their job will be simply to baby-sit as their students negotiate the televised and computerized material and take tests that are administered by outside businesses. No new information will need to be created: after all, it will already be on television, CD-ROM, and the Internet. We can forget that expensive and annoying classroom, and we can forget the teacher-student interaction that drives the learning process.

7) Given that retention rates are universally low, who benefits from the increased advertising and the decreased retention rates? What economic patterns are developing? How many students are paying multiple registration fees in order to pass courses that by their very nature engender a high drop-out rate? Finally, because telecourses can be a profit-center for institutions, how do we keep institutions from overloading sections so that the student-teacher ratio is significantly raised, all in the name of money? The *Chronicle* writes that emerging technologies "might save money by allowing fewer salaried faculty members to serve the same number of students" (Young A26).

This is not an idle point. For instance, the year after we started the Writing telecourses in Tucson, the administration decided to raise the enrollment cap in Writing 100 from 30 students to 45 students, significantly above the NCTE standard of 24 students. When I questioned this move, the administration claimed that because the telecourse instructor of record did not have to prepare and attend a weekly class, the instructor had more time for grading; the adminstration also said that because the course was a short-essay composition course, the teacher didn't even have much grading to do, so 45 students was a reasonable number. Finally, the adminstration said that other telecourses, such as Math, Computer Science, and Psychology, had at least 60 students, so the Writing class was well below Pima's telecourse norm.

In 1997, the College started to increase enrollment again, this time in the Writing 101 course, canceling sections for which contracts had been signed and overloading students into the remaining sections. Now, certainly it is not unreasonable for faculty occasionally to take on additional students, however, the pattern of over-enrolling students in telecourses sets a dangerous precedent. In this situation, an adjunct on a term-by-term contract with no union has no recourse: I was forced to take the extra students or lose my job. In this instance, not only were the faculty asked to teach more students at the same rate of pay, but the students were at risk. In my courses, roughly 50% of the students who sign up for the course complete the course with a grade. The administration has used this statistic as another rationale for raising the enrollment cap, claiming that half the students drop out by the end of the semester so teachers aren't teaching all that many students anyway. This is an unconvincing argument, for if the teacher cannot retain 30 students, how can we expect the teacher to retain 37, or 40, or 45? Instead of using the high drop-out rate as a reason for over-loading course sections, perhaps we should address the many complex reasons for the poor retention rates so that our students have a better chance of succeeding.

The pattern of overloading "invisible" students into telecourses at the expense of teacher salaries and student success is unacceptable. The fact that many teachers of record are part-timers with little power turns the situation into exploitation. Because distance education can be a profit center for institutions, the motivation to make money may have played a role in the PCC decision to raise the

student enrollment figures. According to Pima's *1993-94 Factbook*, after a peak enrollment period in the late 1980's, 1994 saw a continuing decline in enrollment at the Community Campus: "The decrease in [full-time student equivalent, or FTSE] enrollment that started in the Spring 1993 semester continued with a similar decline in enrollment in Spring 1994. The head count enrollment in Spring 1994 was the lowest credit student enrollment in the last nine years" (77)." More specifically, "Annual total FTSE decreased by 532 (-21%), down from 2,548 in 1992-93 to 2,016 in 1993-94" (79). Thus there was a pressure to increase enrollment and contain faculty costs at the same time that telecourses were growing increasingly popular. These facts may explain why PCC emphasizes its telecourses: the extra students who enroll in a telecourse can be taught by a small number of part-time faculty, allowing the College to increase FTSE while decreasing its already low faculty cost. Seen in context, the College's decision to raise the enrollment cap of its Writing telecourses appears especially problematic. At PCC, the pattern is to use the telecourses as a place to increase FTSE at the expense of faculty workload and student success.

In the 1997 MLA Report on Professional Employment, ADFL Director Elizabeth Welles is quoted as saying that "'changes in the way instruction is delivered or in the scope of requirements could modify the current need for classroom teachers'" (Gilbert 14). The MLA document recognizes that new technologies may drastically alter accepted educational and professional practices:

> distance learning(through television and other audio-visual media) and computer-assisted instruction have often been mentioned as pedagogical strategies that might significantly alter faculty-student ratios by reducing the number of classroom contact hours students need, especially in introductory courses. (14)

The report states that "distance teaching and computer-assisted instruction are best delivered in tandem with, rather than separate from, the supervision of 'real' (rather than 'virtual') teachers" (15). As this report suggests and as my one example makes clear, our community must begin to address the uses and misuses of teaching with new technologies.

Similarly, Annette Kolodny argues against a blind reliance on emerging technologies in *Failing the Future: A Dean's Look at Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century*:

> The challenge for policy-makers and the general public is to resist the impulse to force colleges and universities into substituting the kind of rote training that technology can cheaply supply for the more expensive education that teaches critical thinking and analytic skills, values and an understanding of complex relationships, which the learned professor in the classroom can facilitate. An exclusively cost-driven dependence on computers and telecourses may instruct students in a subject; but only a professor with passion and disciplinary expertise can help students understand why a subject is important to think about and how to think about it. (36)

She is correct: we cannot allow education to be subsumed by the drive to lower costs at the expense of the student and the faculty, nor can we allow it to be consumed by the latest gadgets and toys that emerging technologies offer. Administrators and faculty must not be tempted to use such technologies to increase institutional income at the expense of sound and moral teaching. Nonetheless, I have confidence that we can find ways to make the best use of technology--after all, there are many educational and social benefits that can arise from teaching by telecourse and other emerging technologies.

Notes

[1] A telecourse is different from a "teleclass," in which a given lecture is taped and transmitted live, in real-time over cable or satelite networks to students watching either in other classrooms or at home. A telecourse is also different from an "interactive teleclass" in which students and faculty in classrooms at multiple sights are linked in real-time by some combination of video and audio. For a more complete defintion, see Brey.

[2] See Busby and Alfers, and Cherry, et al.

[3] These particular examples are drawn from "Voices and Visions," a televised course in modern American poetry, produced by The New York Center for Visual History and presented by South Carolina ETV Network, a project funded primarily by Annenberg/CPB and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

[4] See hooks, particularly pp 59-76.

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